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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 001429

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: AIR ACCIDENT KILLS OVER 100 IN KANO

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER; REASONS 1.5(B) AND (D)

1.(U) This report is being sent to give Washington the latest information we have about the May 4 airplane crash in Kano. According to our best information, all but two of the eighty people aboard the plane died in the crash which occurred shortly after the Lagos-bound EAS aircraft took off from Kano's airport. The crash took place in a residential neighborhood, and an estimated range of thirty to seventy local residents were also killed. Because of the lack of forensic expertise and local records, ascertaining the exact number of deaths will be difficult.

2.(U) Among the victims are Minister of Sports I.M. Aku, General N.T.H. Bozvingha and the wife and son of influential retired General Jerry Useni, former Minister for the Federal Capital Territory under Sani Abacha. The brother of the Embassy's FSN Political Assistant Mukhtari Shitu was also one of the victims, therefore the tragedy of the crash struck close to home for all Mission personnel, both Americans and FSNs alike. There apparently were no AMCITS on board the flight, though the possibility cannot yet be totally ruled out. The EAS passenger manifest, which lists victims and survivors only by the first initial and surname, contains possible hits on our American Citizen Services Warden database. We continue to check to ensure none of these victims were United States Citizens. Two Frenchmen were confirmed killed in the crash. Bodies of victims who could not be identified were buried in a mass grave in Kano on May 17.

3.(C) This crash highlights the precarious state of many of Nigeria's domestic airlines. The use of old, poorly maintained craft, heightens the danger of a fatal accident. This crash has increased the already high degree of wariness of the expatriate community about domestic air travel in Nigeria.

4.(U) The crash occurred approximately three minutes after takeoff from Kano Airport at about 1:30 p.m., Saturday May 4. The aircraft originated in Lagos, flew to Jos, made a stop in Kano with a return flight to Lagos. The plane went down in the residential area of Gwamaja, destroying many residences, two schools, and reportedly two small neighborhood mosques.

15. (C) President Obasanjo cut short a trip to Southern Africa to respond to the emergency. He visited the site Monday morning and then prayed with the Emir of Kano for the repose of the souls of the dead. He declared a two-day period of national mourning and committed N10,000,000 (\$870,000) in relief assistance to the victims. (Comment: President Obasanjo seems to have learned a public relations lesson after the Ijeka Cantonment explosions in late January. Then, Obasanjo was accused of being callous and insensitive to victims and their families after the explosions claimed over 1,000 lives. This time, Obasanjo responded quickly to the disaster, with both words of condolence and aid to the victims. Several of his supporters, especially the Governor of Bauchi State, urged him to do so. Although some still complain that his visit to the crash site was too short, that he neglected to meet with the victim's families, and that the relief funds were too meager, Obasanjo's response showed greater human and political sensitivities than he did four months ago. End Comment.)

16. (U) Theories about the cause of the crash abound. EAS is reported by the media as notorious for its aged fleet, poor maintenance record, and financial difficulties. Although no report specifically mentions the age of the crashed BAC1-11-500 jet, there is speculation that the plane was nearly thirty years old. Moreover, the Subcommittee Chairman

of the House of Representatives Committee on the Nigeria Civil Aviation Authority, Ned Nwoko, has hinted of a law already in the works which would make it compulsory for aircraft older than 25 to be grounded. The Ministry of Aviation had proposed a ban on aircraft over 22 years, but at the time of the accident it was being contested by the Private Airline Association. If this law were already on the books the plane would have been offline and the tragedy averted. (The modus operandi of many Nigerian airlines is to purchase, at relatively low costs, aged planes deemed too old and taken offline by carriers in other countries. Further cost-cutting measures by some carriers include using reconditioned rather than new parts when carrying out repairs.)

17. (C) EAS management publicly contend the aircraft was in perfect mechanical order before the flight, but other reports claimed the same aircraft was involved in a near accident only a week ago during the same flight. The National Chairman of the Alliance For Democracy political party told PolCouns that he was told by a local official in Kano that the pilot who flew the plane from Jos to Kano refused to fly the aircraft to Lagos because of its condition. The AD chairman said that EAS had to find a willing pilot at the last minute.

18. (U) There are reports that the crash was caused when a wing fell off the plane; other reports claim that there was an engine explosion. Still other reports blamed the runway, claiming that the main runway is under repair and the one used Saturday was too short. One "black box" has been found, while the other is still missing. The government has grounded all BAC1-11-500 aircraft in Nigeria and has promised a full investigation. In a conversation with Ambassador, the Minister of Aviation has asked for technical assistance to help establish a program to investigate the crash as well as help it establish better criteria for purchasing and maintaining commercial aircraft (septel).

19. (C) While the crash has shaken many people and caused them to lament the state of the domestic airlines, some Nigerians feel stung by the international media attention the crash has generated. During a May 7 meeting with the Ambassador, Foreign Minister Lamido stated that CNN and BBC were overly critical, making it appear that Nigerians and the GON were totally irresponsible. He remarked that airplane crashes were inevitable in any country if enough flights were attempted but CNN and the BBC were trying to make Nigerian skies look especially dangerous. Yet, almost in the same breath, Lamido castigated the domestic air carriers and admitted trepidation when flying on some domestic airlines.

110. (C) This air crash is the latest event in a string of tragedies that have befallen Nigeria in the past eight months. Because of the nature of this particular tragedy everyone has had to sheathe their political swords, if only for the moment. There will be collective mourning and the grief will be genuine. There will be calls for reform and these calls will be sincere as well. The Ambassador received an urgent appeal from the Nigerian Minister of Aviation Kemi Chikwe for assistance to investigate the crash and to help Nigeria get a better handle on its domestic airlines (septel). We have long maintained that most domestic commercial airlines in Nigeria are unsafe. A thorough investigation into aircraft procurement and maintenance practices is long overdue. However, there is danger that this somber moment will recede and that business as usual will resume unless momentum to launch a serious investigation is maintained. Our positive response to the Aviation Minister's request could help sustain that moment. It would be a compound tragedy if this crash does not compel greater airline safety.

JETER